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Volume XIX Issue 470

Studies in Ecclesiastes

The Words and Work of God and Man

Part 4 of 5

by — Vladimir Gelesnoff (1877-1921)

THE SOUL'S YEARNING AND GOD'S HUMBLING

Before proceeding with our studies in Ecclesiastes it may be well to point out a peculiar morphological feature of this author. The five books, though they are independent, are yet "dove-tailed" together by the way in which the final thought of each leads directly to the next. The effect is that each successive composition is of the nature of a digression from the composition standing before it, but a digression which is expanded into an independent piece of writing.

The Third Book (5:10-6:12) resumes and carries forward to completion the train of thought developed in Book I. There, the Assembler was engaged in surveying the various departments of human activity; here, he analyzes the spring of all activity under the sun – the soul's desire, or yearning (6:2). The mode of treatment is both simple and methodic. The thoughts are drawn in orderly sequence: maxims (5:10-12); illustrations (5:13-6:6); reflections (6:7-12). The Book opens with a series of maxims setting forth the vanity of desire in its several phases. These are followed by a number of typical instances supporting the ideas expressed in the maxims. Then follow practical reflections suggested by what has been gleaned in the course of investigation.

Like the preceding, this Book is also followed by a string of "notes" responding to the questions of 6:12. These embody in pithy sayings the results which wise thinking has yielded (7:1-12).

In the First Book, where the author successively subjected to review the various phases of human activity, with the only result that each was found wanting, the sentiment was voiced that all labor, though bringing a sense of pleasure, fails to give genuine satisfaction. Now this line of thought is carried one degree further: What has been found to be true of outward activity is found to be equally true of the inward principle which prompted it. Ecclesiastes asserts that the soul is not satisfied with the attainment of the objects yearned

10 One who loves silver is never satisfied with his silver.

for. This is the starting-point of the present book:

And one who loves superabundance never has enough income;

This too is vanity.

Having thus stated the main thesis of the present discussion, the Assembler proceeds to establish it. He points out that attainment without satisfaction is a familiar experience. He then observes the added fact, attested by concrete examples in actual life, that attainment is frequently attended by hurt and followed by failure while, on the other hand, genuine happiness is found to exist where the most coveted objects of human envy are absent.

11 When goods increase those who devour them multiply;

And what profit are they to their possessor save



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- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25):
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians
- the organic nature of the church, the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Romans 11:13):
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
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- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:
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Studies (continued from front page)

for the sight of his eyes?

12 The sleep of the servant is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; Yet the plenty which the rich man has, it does not permit him to sleep.

These considerations have paved the way for introducing the two contrasts which occupy the place of prominence in this book: On the one hand is a picture of God-given prosperity and God-given satisfaction in it, and on the other hand is the opposite picture of the same God-given prosperity and the satisfaction withheld. These companion pictures emphasize the idea, which is untiringly reiterated, that happiness is not within the power of man, but is the direct and special gift of God to the individual:

13 *There* is a travailing evil I have seen under the

Riches are kept by their possessor to his peril;

- 14 Then these riches perish through some experience of evil; Then he begets a son, when there is not anything *left* in his hand.
- 15 Just as he *came* forth from his mother's belly, Naked shall he return, to go as he came; He shall not take up anything from his toil which he may carry in his hand.
- 16 This too *is a* travailing evil; Exactly as he came, so shall he go, And what advantage is it to him since he toiled for wind?
- 17 Moreover, all his days are in darkness and mourning,

With much vexation and illness and wrath.

- 18 Behold, that which I have seen that is good, that is fitting, is: To eat and to drink and to see good in all one's toil that he is toiling under the sun, During the number of days in his life that the One, Elohim, has given to him, For that is his portion.
- 19 Moreover, concerning any man to whom the One, Elohim, gives riches and substance, And gives him power to eat of it and to obtain his portion and to rejoice in his toil,

This *good*, it *is a* gift of Elohim.

20 For he shall not be much mindful of the days

of his life. For the *One*, Elohim, is keeping him humble

in *the* rejoicing of his heart.

In 5:19 Ecclesiastes speaks of natural happiness as being God's gift to the individual. The thought is amplified in :20 by the assertion that natural happiness, like all things belonging to the eonian system, is alloyed with humbling (*cf.* 1:13; 3:10).

That which is wrought under the sun, as also the times and seasons, has been designed by God for man's discipline and training. Parents spoil their children by giving free vent to their wishes; rulers corrupt manhood by lavish prodigality of favors to their supporters – but God's methods are adapted to man's present constitution, which is a strange admixture of good and evil. All of His ways have in view the debasing effect of unstinted gratification. His dispensation of the good that gladdens the heart is tempered by the humbling which chastens the spirit. In all of His methods is discernible a subtle combination: an exquisite of goodness and severity whereby spiritual rations are developed and heightened and baser instincts are curbed and subdued.

The vanity or transitoriness of the soul's yearning appears most fully in the light of death.

This too is a travailing evil; exactly as he came, so shall he go, and what advantage is it to him since he toiled for wind? (Ecc.5:16).

In concluding this composition Ecclesiastes dwells on this thought.

- **6:1** There is an evil under the sun that I have seen, And it *lies* great *up*on humanity:
- When a man to whom the One, Elohim, gives riches and substance and glory, And he has no lack to his soul of all that it vearns for,

Yet the One, Elohim, does not give him power to eat of it

Because a foreign man eats it, This is a vanity, and it is a travailing evil.

3 If a man begets a hundred children and lives for many years, So that the days of his years become a multitude, Yet his soul is not satisfied with good,



And also *there* is no tomb for him, I say, A stillborn child is better off than he.

- 4 For it comes in vanity, And in darkness it goes away, And in darkness its name is covered over.
- 5 Moreover, it neither saw the sun nor knew anything;
 - Thus this had more rest than that man,
- 6 Even supposing he lived twice a thousand years and saw no good; Are not all going to the same place?

Only two points need to be noted here. He has been describing the spectacle of accumulated wealth with happiness withheld by God, and pronounced it the worst of all fates – an abortion is better than he. He passes on to practical reflections:

7 All of a man's toil is for his mouth, Yet even *then* the soul is nev*er* filled.

how to walk in front of the living?

8 For what advantage has a wise man over the stupid one, And what for the humble man who knows

The recognition of the ability to enjoy the details of passing life as a God-given thing, and the spectacle of the man to whom Elohim does not give the power to eat of his wealth (6:2), naturally lead on to the thought that God acts on fixed principles which the individual is powerless to alter.

9 Better the sight of the eyes than the roving of the soul.

This too is vanity and a grazing on wind.

10 What has come to be has already been called by its name,

And that which man is has been foreknown; No one can adjudicate

against *Him* Who is mightier than he.

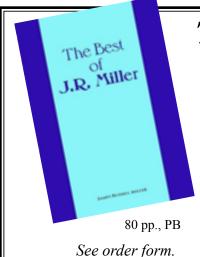
Hence, since man is incapable of resisting his Maker, what is the use of following "words" ("theories" or "doctrines") which pretend to further man's welfare but in reality only multiply vanities?

- 11 When there are many words the vanity increases:
 - What advantage is that to man?
- 12 For who knows what is good for a man in life During the number of days in his transitory life, *Seeing* that He makes them like *a* shadow? For who can tell a man what shall come after him under the sun?

Who can tell what is good for a human in this life, or who can tell what shall come afterwards? These questions are dealt with in the notes which fill the interval between this Book and the next notes.

Notes

- 7:1 A good name is better than the best attar, And the day of *one's* death than *the* day of his birth.
- 2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting In that it *is the* terminus of every human; Thus let the living lay *this* on his heart.
- 3 Better is vexation than mirth,



The Best of J.R. Miller, Vol. 1

by — James Russell Miller (1840–1912)

Miller was a prolific author, born of Irish/Scottish descent to James Alexander Miller and Eleanor Creswell, near Frankfort Springs, Beaver County, PA. He was a graduate of Westminster College (New Wilmington, PA), and Allegheny Theological Seminary (Allegheny, PA). Miller pastored churches in New Wilmington, PA, Philadelphia, PA, and Rock Island, IL, and was the author of over 60 published books, as well as countless booklets and pamphlets. He also served as supervisor of over two dozen periodicals with a combined annual circulation of over 66 million copies at the time of his death. This is the first in a collected series of his best selected articles.

- For with *a* troubled countenance *the* heart may *be made* better.
- 4 *The* heart of *the* wise *is* in *the* house of mourning,

Æ

- And *the* heart of *the* stupid in *the* house of rejoicing.
- 5 Better to hear *the* rebuke of *a* wise *man* Than *for* one *to* hear *the* song of *the* stupid.
- 6 For as *the* sound of the briars under the pot, So *is the* mirth of the stupid *man*; This too *is* vanity.
- 7 Extortion makes a wise *man* raving, And *a* bribe destroys *the* heart.
- 8 *The* end of *a* matter *is* better than its beginning; *A* long-*suffer*ing spirit *is* better than *a* haughty spirit.
- 9 Do not be rash to be vexed in your spirit, For vexation rests in *the* bosom of *the* stupid.
- 10 Do not say, Why is it that the former days were better than these *present times*? For *it is* not in wisdom *that* you ask about this.
- 11 Wisdom *is* good with *an* allotment And *an* advantage to *those* seeing the sun.
- 12 For in the shadow of wisdom *it is as* in the shadow of silver,
 And *the* advantage of knowledge *is that* wisdom keeps alive *those* possessing it.

This series of sayings (7:1-12) is suggested by the two questions which concluded Book III, and which relate to the present life and the hereafter.

❖ Who knows what is good for a man in life? ...

❖ Who can tell a man what shall come after him under the sun?

I understand these questions as the interposition of an imaginary objector, and the notes that follow as the rejoinder of the Assembler.

The keynote to these sayings is found in the recurring word "better," which reveals both the point and purpose of these sayings, and the relation they sustain to the discussion standing before them.

To the roving soul (6:9) casting an envious eye on another's wealth Ecclesiastes says (in view of the instances considered), "Since appearances are often misleading, it is not possible to decide that one's life is truly prosperous and happy until we know how it terminates." To the questions bearing on what is good in life and the hereafter the Assembler answers, (1) "What is really good is not determined by personal preferences, but by the general effect of a thing upon humanity"; (2) "Man's future may, in general, be inferred with a certain degree of probability from the present." The thought developed in this string of responses rests upon a series of "oppositions" arranged in two groups, which must be taken together, though the proverb of 7:7 separates them:

- ❖ A good name, established at death and the consideration of death as the terminus of our lives exert a wholesome influence on the living (7:1-2).
- ❖ Vexation and a troubled countenance and the seeking of self-improvement in the house of mourning work to the heart (7:3-4).



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- Œ
- ❖ Rebuke from the wise is better than giddy mirth which is transitory (7:5-6).
- ❖ The end of a matter, establishing the truth of a forecast, is better than the beginning where questions are raised as to the possible outcome (7:8).
- ❖ Patience is better than a rash spirit which is a sign of stupidity (7:9).
- ❖ It is not wisdom to judge the present, which is, incomplete, by the former days, which afford a complete view by their entirety (7:10).
- ❖ Both wisdom and silver defend against external attack, but wisdom also affects the life the life of character (7:11-12).

THE WORK OF GOD

In the Fourth Book (7:13-9:15), Ecclesiastes returns to the subject dealt with in Book II: the work of God. There he emphasizes the antagonism between good and evil. Here he considers the relation between the two opposites. The opening sentence strikes the keynote of the whole section.

- 13 See *the* work of the *One*, Elohim; For who can set in order that which He has overturned?
- 14 In a day of good be *resting* in *the* good, And in *a* day of evil, be vigilant; Indeed the *One*, Elohim, has made this *one* along with that *one* For *this* reason, that *a* man *can*not find *out* anything *about* his hereafter.

This is an epitome of the thesis which our author proposes to consider. In accord with God's Word as a whole, the Assembler traces all to God.

A detailed exposition is not in harmony with the suggestive character of these studies. Hence we must content ourselves with noting the general drift of thought and offering a few remarks on the more obscure passages.

Having stated that God has made the day of good along with the day of evil, Ecclesiastes instances familiar experiences supporting the assertion (7:15-22), and then, surveying the totality of things, expresses the conviction that man lacks the power to solve the mystery of the whole.

15 I have seen all *this* in my days of vanity: *There* is *the* righteous *man who* perishes in his

righteousness,

And *there* is *the* wicked *man who is* prolonged in his evil.

16 Do not be abundantly *self*-righteous, And do not be *think*ing *your*self superlatively wise;

Why should you make yourself desolate?

17 Do not be abundantly wicked, and do not be frivolous;

Why should you die when *it is* not your season?

18 *It is* good that you hold to this, And from that also do let your hand rest; For *he who is* fearful of Elohim shall *come* forth *from* them all.

19 Wisdom itself gives more strength to the wise man

Than ten *men of* authority who are in *a* city.

- 20 For *there* is no righteous man in *the* earth Who does good and never sins.
- 21 Moreover, to all the words that *people* speak do not give your heart's *attention*,

 That you may not hear your servant maledicting you;
- 22 For even many times your heart knows That you your*self* also have maledicted others.
- 23 All this I probed by wisdom; I said, I shall be wise, Yet it was far from me:
- 24 Far *away is* that which has been, and deep, deep Who *can* find it *out*?

(To be continued.)



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